

Organizing the Men for War

Numbers 1:1–19

The book of Numbers is the fourth of the five books of the Pentateuch (“Pentateuch” means simply *five books*). The Old Testament calls it the *Torah*: “This *Book of the Law* [סֵפֶר הַתּוֹרָה] shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate in it day and night” (Josh. 1:8). “Torah” is Hebrew for *law*.

Who wrote Numbers? Christ’s word is authoritative. When he was in the midst of an intense conversation with the Pharisees and Sadducees, he bore witness to the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch. Listen to his words: “For *Moses* said, Honor thy father and thy mother; and, Whoso curseth father or mother, let him die the death” (Mark 7:10). In this verse Jesus cites “Moses” as the penman (human author) of the words “Honor thy father and thy mother” (Ex. 20, Deut. 5) and of “Whoso curseth father or mother, let him die the death” (Ex. 21, Lev. 20). Thus, Jesus testifies that Moses is the human author of Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy—three of the books of the Pentateuch. If you’ve ever read the Pentateuch straight through (something I highly recommend that you do), you will see that it is a continued story. The divine author—the Spirit of Christ—inspired the revelation of the Pentateuch as it was given. The five books of the Pentateuch exhibit Moses’ unique writing style. If Moses wrote Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy, as Jesus asserted, and Numbers bears the marks of the same human authorship, then there is no reason not to conclude that Moses is the author of Numbers as well. On the authority of the Lord Jesus we know that Moses was the human writer of the Pentateuch (with the exception of the last chapter, Deut. 34, which gives the account of Moses’ death—no doubt added by his successor, Joshua).

Consider the opening words of our text this morning: “Now the LORD spoke to Moses in the Wilderness of Sinai.” The KJV is more literal: “*And* the LORD spake unto Moses in the wilderness of Sinai.” Here is a book that starts with the word “and”! This seems highly unusual, even counterintuitive. Think of the opening words of Charles Dickens’ novel *A Tale of Two Cities*: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times”—a striking statement, to be sure, but it doesn’t start with the word “and.” I submitted a query to AI: “How many great works of English literature in the last 300 years begin with the word ‘and.’” The answer: “There are *no* widely recognized great works of English literature from the last 300 years that begin with the word ‘and.’” But here is a biblical book, Numbers, that begins with the word *And*: “*And* the LORD spake unto Moses.” The author writes with great care and precision; he doesn’t waste words (I know, chapter 1 contains a lot of repetition, but that is intentional and necessary, as we shall see). Clearly, the word “and” shows that the narrative of Numbers is tied to and connected to the previous book, Leviticus. But actually, the story is larger and more remarkable than that:

Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers *all* begin with the word “and,” indicating that they are part of a continuing story that begins in Genesis. The Pentateuch contains five books, but they comprise a series; they belong together.

A word about the title: “Numbers.” This was the title of the book (Ἀριθμοί) in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures made about 200 years before Christ. It was retained in the Vulgate (“Numeri”), the translation of the Bible into Latin, and the name has stuck. The name refers to the two censuses—one at the beginning of the wilderness wanderings (ch. 1), and the second census nearly forty years later, as the new generation was about to cross over the Jordan River into Canaan (ch. 26).

So the English Bibles call it “Numbers,” but notice that the title of the book in the Hebrew Bible is במדבר, “In the Wilderness,” taken from the book’s opening words: “And the LORD spoke unto Moses *in the wilderness* of Sinai (בְּמִדְבַּר סִינַי).” This is significant. God spoke to Israel “in the *wilderness*.” The Word of God is for *all* seasons of life—for happy days, for sad days; for exhilarating days, for monotonous days; for days of celebration, for days of sadness. Many Christians seek “mountaintop” experiences. They go to conferences to hear the best speakers and listen to the best music. Now there’s nothing wrong with conferences *per se*, as long as God is glorified and the teaching is biblical—a couple churches in our own presbytery hold yearly conferences—but God has ordained that his people grow through what are called the *ordinary means of grace*—the Word, the sacraments and prayer. He wants us to meet with his people week in, week out, every seven days. We gather to meet with him. We hear his Word preached. We observe the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. We lift up our hearts in prayer to the throne of grace. Under the new covenant we don’t need to go to a central sanctuary to do this, for at Pentecost, the risen, ascended Christ poured out his Spirit upon the whole church. We no longer need to travel to Jerusalem to the Holy of holies in the temple in order to worship God. Jesus said: “It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you.”¹ Now, under the new covenant, wherever the church of Christ is properly constituted, under godly elders and ministers, the church exists. The Holy Spirit is not something we administer to ourselves. We don’t sit by a TV screen and receive the Holy Spirit by some high-power televangelist who claims he has the power to administer the Holy Spirit remotely. Wherever the church is properly constituted and the Word of God is properly preached, the Holy Spirit is present. Under the new covenant we meet on the first day of the week, the Lord’s day, in obedience to God. In fact, *meeting* is the fundamental thing the church does. When, during the Covid hysteria, the governor said that churches could not meet, this

¹ John 16:7

church continued to meet. We never missed a Sunday. Our reasoning was simple: God says meet; the governor says, don't meet; we'll obey God. We didn't know at that time whether police might burst through the door, but we met anyway.

At the time of Moses, Israel had been enslaved in Egypt for hundreds of years. God delivered them from Egypt and revealed himself to them at Sinai. Now, at the beginning of Numbers, they were in the wilderness. It was not their permanent home, but God was there. The LORD spoke to Moses, as our text puts it, "in the wilderness of Sinai."

In their introduction to the book of Numbers the ESV editors observe that the Hebrew title "is more descriptive of the book [than the title Numbers]. Numbers tells how God's people traveled from Mount Sinai to the border of the Promised Land. But when they refused to take possession of the Land, God made them wander *in the wilderness* for nearly forty years."²

"The LORD spoke to Moses in the Wilderness of Sinai." You may be in a wilderness at this point in your life, but if you humble yourself and seek the LORD, as he is proclaimed in his faithful churches, he will cleanse you of your sins and receive you as his child. He will give you a purpose in life. He will give you his exceeding great and precious promises. He will be with you all the days of your life and take you to heaven to be with him forever. It may be wilderness down here, but it will be glory by and by. The desert will blossom like a rose. You will find the Rose of Sharon and the lily of the valley. The bright and morning star will illuminate your pathway, and God will strengthen you in every good work to do his will. He will never leave you nor forsake you. His promise is sure.

Note that "the LORD spoke to Moses . . . *in the tabernacle of meeting*." The tabernacle of meeting was the place of worship under the old covenant. It contained God's throne: the mercy seat. There, God met with Moses as the representative of his people, and Moses relayed God's Word to the people. Many of us are so busy, we forget to meet with God. The Psalmist wrote: "He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High shall *abide* under the shadow of the Almighty."³ We need to take time to meet with God. We need to seek his face daily in prayer. We need to practice his presence every day. We need to pray the prayer of Samuel: "Speak, LORD, for thy servant heareth." Moses didn't just sit down one day and write the book of Numbers, all in one sitting. It was the fruit of spending much time in the tabernacle, seeking God's face. We get impatient. We want shortcuts. We want the blessing without putting in the hard work of Bible study and prayer. The men's Bible study has been reading through Thomas Watson's *The Godly Man's Picture, Drawn with a Scripture Pencil*. It is full of rich insights on what it means to pursue a life of godliness. It is evident that Watson

² ESV introduction to Numbers (Logos Bible Software)

³ Ps. 91:1

spent many hours walking with God, meditating on the Word of God, and we profit from his labors. May God enable us to do the same! Amen.

Our text continues with the LORD commanding Moses: “Take a census of all the congregation of the children of Israel, by their families, by their fathers’ houses, according to the number of names, every male individually, from twenty years old and above—all who are able to go to war in Israel.” Note well: Why did God order a numbering of the people? So that they would be ready to go to war. God was going to give them the Promised Land as an inheritance, but he knew that they were going to face many powerful enemies: Sihon, king of the Amorites, who refused to let Israel pass through his territory; and Og, king of Bashan, whose kingdom was given to the tribes of Reuben and Gad and half the tribe of Manasseh as their inheritance; and the kings of the tribes of Canaan. These were powerful enemies with large armies. Some of them, having learned developments in metallurgy—iron smelting and forging—possessed deadly weapons not yet available to Israel. As long as they were obedient, Israel had God on their side, but God wanted his people to depend on *him*. God’s purpose is later described in Judges 3:1, where we read: “Now these are the nations which the LORD left, *to prove Israel by them*, even as many of Israel as had not known all the wars of Canaan.” God knew exactly what he was going to do, but he wanted his people to depend on him.

In the meantime, while Israel was “in the wilderness,” he ordered Moses to take a census. It was to be carried out exactly as God directed. All the tribes were to be treated equally. No tribe was to get an advantage. The people were to have confidence in the method and in the results. There would be no padding of numbers to the advantage of any particular tribe when they finally received their inheritance. God said: “Take a census. Number all the males twenty years of age and above—all who are able to go to war.”

So why did God order a numbering of the people? Let us consider three reasons. First,

1. To assert his supreme dominion over his people

Calvin’s comments are helpful. He observes “that the people were not numbered except at God’s command, in order *that He might thus assert His supreme dominion over them*; and also, that the mode of taking the census was so arranged, that there should be no confusion of ranks either through fraud or irregularity; for this was the reason why each tribe had its superintendents, lest any one should slip into a tribe to which he did not belong.” Well put!

Here, then, is a central biblical truth: *the LORD of Glory is his people's sovereign*. He calls upon men to honor him as Lord. It is he who has made us, and not we ourselves. We are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.⁴

This is a lesson that every Christian needs to learn. We are to come to God, recognizing his greatness and power. We are to come humbly, recognizing that *he* is God, and we are not. We come as beggars begging for mercy. We do not come as peers or as superiors. We come on *his* terms, not ours. We don't make demands of God. We don't say to him, "I will serve you *if!*" Whatever we have is an undeserved favor. God owed us nothing. We owe him everything. "Who makes you differ from another? And *what do you have that you did not receive?* Now if you did indeed receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?" (1 Cor. 4:7).

Each of us came into the world naked. "We brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out."⁵ Whatever gifts we had by being born into a good family or a dysfunctional family, a rich family or a poor family, a godly family or a secular family, a family where we learned the biblical worldview or a family that knew nothing of biblical truth—these were all preplanned before the beginning of time by a sovereign God who works all things after the counsel of his own will, for his glory. He is the God who teaches us, "And we know that *all* things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose."⁶ *All* things—no exceptions! If you love God and belong to Christ you can have perfect assurance that whatever happens to you in this vale of tears happens for God's glory and your ultimate good. "No good thing will he withhold from them that walk uprightly."⁷

God is sovereign over his people, and he demonstrates his sovereignty by commanding that Israel take a census. "The Lord knoweth them that are *his*."⁸ "We are *his* people, and the sheep of his pasture."⁹

If you have a collection of gold coins, you have a right to count them. Nobody else has a right to count your gold coins. You have that right because they are yours. In the case of his people Israel, God had a right to count them, because they belong to him. By ordering a numbering of his people, God was asserting that they were his property. He has supreme dominion over us, his people. Second, God ordered a numbering of his people

2. To teach his fatherly protection over his people

Who were counted? "Every male individually, from twenty years old and above—all who are able to go to war in Israel." There is no question about the meaning

⁴ Ps. 100

⁵ 1 Tim. 6:7

⁶ Rom. 8:28

⁷ Ps. 84:11

⁸ 2 Tim. 2:19

⁹ Ps. 100:3

of the term “male.” It is the same term used in Genesis 1:27, “*male* and female created he them.” Males aged 20 and above—that is, adult males—were to be counted for the census that God commanded.

Clearly this implies that adult males have a God-given responsibility to protect women and children. There is a reason why God made *men* larger and stronger. That difference is rooted in creation. The creation itself teaches that God made men and women different. Haters of God want to erase biological distinctions. Feminists falsely claim that women can do anything that men can do, but that is not true. Those who push the lie that biological sex is not inherent, but is chosen—is learned—claim that there is nothing unique about a woman—that a *man* can bear children! They claim that it is sexist to speak of *nursing mothers*, that the correct term ought to be “nursing *persons*”—but this is insanity. God created man male and female. He chose your sex from eternity past—before you were even conceived in your mother’s womb. It is part of your identity as a human person. Both male and female are part of the human race, but there are differences. And when our text speaks of “men” able to go to war, that implies that a man’s purpose is to protect his family. Men are to be the protectors of women. Little children are to be brought up as boys and girls—both equally valuable in the eyes of our wise and loving heavenly Father. Little boys ought to be taught to protect girls and women. Parents should never let their little boys pick on little girls and be disrespectful to women. There should be no men in women’s sports, nor women in men’s sports. Those who argue otherwise are at war with reality and at war with God. Men are to protect their families, even by putting their own lives in danger, if necessary. If they do this, they will be blessed by God. Women are to regard childbearing as a manifest blessing of God. God’s people ought to promote marriage and encourage Christian men and women to marry. A few weeks ago some actress—I never heard of her before—got her fifteen minutes of fame by proclaiming that marriage is “legalized slavery,” and that her father didn’t raise her to be anybody’s wife. Hogwash! Marriage is *not* slavery. God himself ordained marriage. It is *his* institution. Marriage is the voluntary choice of a man and a woman who choose to enter into this holy estate. Husbands and wives are not slaves against their will; rather, godly husbands and wives “serve one another in love”—in imitation of Christ, who came not to *be served*, but to *serve*, and to give his life a ransom for many. Voluntary servanthood is a noble estate! The Lord of glory voluntarily came to give his life for lost sinners who could not save themselves. That is the most noble act of voluntary service in all human history.

The bottom line: men are to protect their families. When called to protect their homeland against attacks from foreign powers in a just and lawfully-declared war, it is *men* who are to go to war, not women. Those who argue otherwise are enemies of God and will ultimately give account at the judgment seat of Christ. “It is a

fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”¹⁰ Amen! Thirdly, God ordered a numbering of his people

3. To prepare his people for spiritual warfare

Ephesians 6:12 declares that “we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.” Note well that “we wrestle not against flesh and blood” did not suddenly become true with the writing of the book of Ephesians. It has always been the truth, ever since the fall. Israel’s enemies opposed Israel because they opposed God. Israel’s enemies were motivated by evil spirits that hated God. God was using Israel as his agent of judgment against the Canaanites,^β who were idolators to the extreme—who laid their infant children on the fiery, burning idols of the pagan god Molech. Instead of fighting Israel, they ought to have repented of their idolatry, surrendered to Israel and adopted Israel’s God.

In every age and time God’s people need to learn spiritual warfare. The church must “Fight the good fight of faith.”¹¹ Enemies surround us, and we overcome them by the blood of the Lamb.¹² We will develop this theme more as we proceed through this book, but let’s review:

Why did God order a numbering of the people? (1) To assert his supreme dominion over his people; (2) To teach his fatherly protection over his people; (3) To prepare his people for spiritual warfare.

Amen.

¹⁰ Heb. 10:31

¹¹ 1 Tim. 6:12

¹² Rev. 12:11